

RETURNING TO “NORMALITY”:  
HOW FINNS RECOLLECT THEIR ADAPTATION  
TO EVERYDAY LIFE AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

*“War has follow’d me, like many others,  
through my whole life that’s just how it is.”*  
(Woman, b. 1923.)<sup>1</sup>

INTRODUCTION

An outbreak of war, the end of war and the process of returning to peace are times and situations that are different from our normal day-to-day life. They have an effect on society collectively, but are experienced and remembered personally by each individual member of society. Memories connected to wartime and the aftermath of a war may be used as points of reference for autobiographical recollection and narration. An essential feature of these kinds of memories is that they are conceived as kinds of milestones or turning points in the course of an individual’s own life, and they help the person reminiscing to understand and interpret him/herself as well as his/her whole life.<sup>2</sup> Some of these memories are told again and again, and they may even make different kinds of contributions to the creation of a socially shared culture of remembering. The memories of individuals may act as a breeding ground for communicative remembering and thus reinforce and maintain the content and forms of social memory of a society, or even collective memory of a nation.

The phases of the Second World War, as events at the front and in everyday life outside the front, were multifaceted in Finland, both in terms of timing and the opponent. Finland fought against the Soviet Union in the Winter War between 1939 and 1940, and subsequently had to give up some of its territory to the Soviet Union. The Continuation War between the two countries was fought from 1941 to 1944. After the interim peace was established between Finland and the Soviet Union, Finnish soldiers had to fight German soldiers (their former brothers-in-arms during the Continuation War) in Lapland in order to comply with the Soviet Union’s deadline for the removal of German troops from Finland.

The process of returning to peace after the Continuation War was complex, and some of the problems of wartime actually became even more evident after the end of the war. Finland had to make reparation payments to the Soviet Union, and the evacuated Karelian population (about 400 000 people) had to be resettled. Peace did not automatically signify better times; on the contrary, on both social, and especially individual level, the aftermath of the war was apparent in people’s everyday lives for decades. It is also of central importance to note that after a war it is not possible to

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation comes from an essay response to the questionnaire in my material (see ref. 4). The response was written by a woman born in 1923.

<sup>2</sup> Pillemer 1998. 1–4.

return to a pre-war state of peace – alterations and changes are inevitable and permanent.

In this paper, the process of returning to peace after the Second World War in Finland is approached through the experiences of ordinary people, specifically through their reminiscences recalled decades after the war. I have studied how elderly Finns recollect and narrate these experiences and memories some sixty years later, and how they mentally survived the after-effects of war in their daily life and continued their life in the face of changed circumstances. Above all, I concentrate on the return of the men from the war front and on how people recollect adapting to post-war civilian life and new life situations. The emphasis is on listening to people's own stories; how they recollect events in their own families, and home villages, and how they themselves incorporate these memories into the historical knowledge of the immediate post-war years.<sup>3</sup>

## RESEARCH MATERIAL

The material analysed in this study is based on the inquiry "From War to Peace" conducted in 2006. The informants were asked to write, in their own words, about their memories from the time of the Continuation War and the Lapland War, the ending of the war, how they organised their life after peace was declared, as well as some details about their current life.<sup>4</sup> The informants came from all over Finland, although the regions with best representation were Central Finland and the western coast. These regions were almost completely sheltered from acts of war, except for the bombing of some cities and industrial areas. Men from these regions returned from the war front to their homes, in which their families had lived throughout the war. Displaced people from the region assigned to the Soviet Union were evacuated to these areas and some settled there after the declaration of peace in September 1944. While the military operation continued in Lapland, some of its population was evacuated to the aforementioned areas. Active war operations ceased in November 1944, but the war did not come to a complete halt until April 1945.

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<sup>3</sup> My paper is connected to the research project "The War That Follows Peace. Aftermath of World War II in the Finnish Society c. 1944–2000." It is a co-operative project of the University of Jyväskylä and Åbo Akademi University, the Swedish University of Finland. The researchers are historians and ethnologists, but the main emphasis is on a historical approach. The research project focuses on how Finnish society survived the economic, social and cultural after-effects of the Second World War. (See e.g. Karonen & Tarjamo 2006a; Korhonen 2009.)

<sup>4</sup> The inquiry was sent to the network of informants of the Archives of Ethnology of Åbo Akademi University and to the network of informants of the Memory Archives of Central Finland at the University of Jyväskylä, Department of History and Ethnology. The archives received 124 replies, with an almost equal division between male and female respondents. The oldest writer was born in 1917 and the youngest in 1959. Writers born between 1917 and 1927 had been involved, in one way or another, in the war or the home front. Writers born between 1928 and 1938 had been children or adolescents during the war and the return to peace. The material also includes some responses from individuals born after 1939, who largely narrate the experiences of their parents or other relatives or have written down their relatives' memories.

Reminiscing is in this connection analysed as a phenomenon taking place within everyday interaction; it deals with the personal experiences of people who lived through the same times, or discussion of those times. The emotionally significant issues talked about within a family or a person's intimate circle can differ significantly in nuance and emphasis from the public culture of reminiscing and from historical knowledge. When people reminisce and narrate within their intimate circle, they contextualise their memories, in one way or another, into both the shared knowledge of the historical time they are recollecting and the interpretations presented in later times by researchers of history, public discourse and the media.<sup>5</sup> As a shared experience, the memories of war are attached to a socially shared historical awareness. As well as being examples of historical awareness, individual experiences are textual and discursive resources that people put to use when they narrate and analyse their own memories.<sup>6</sup> One aspect of this is the impact that the media has on the creation of cultural schemes or stereotypes.<sup>7</sup>

Finnish literature, cinema and television have all contributed to the creation of generally shared and memory-enforcing cultural schemes and tools concerning the time of war. When the time reminisced about is temporally distant, as in this case when elderly persons reminisce about their life over sixty years ago, recollection may require different kinds of connections with a collectively shared experience and history. Thus, the historical, collectively recognised and historically verifiable event frames the individual experience and its memory. However, in Finland the return to peace and the post-war reconstruction have not been the subject of equivalent media-created narratives. In this paper, the purpose is in particular to clarify the communal and individual memories that arise when people reminisce about the time of returning to peace through their own everyday experiences and those of the people close to them.

## THE RETURN OF MEN FROM THE FRONT

How do the narrators recall the end of the Second World War and settling into peace at a time when the guns have been silent for over sixty years? How did they find out that peace had been declared and how do they remember the return of the men from the front? The narrators seem to associate their own impression of the coming of peace with the moment when the news of the armistice between Finland and the Soviet Union reached their home, largely through the medium of radio. Many reminiscences of the coming of peace are flashbulb memories<sup>8</sup> of situations connected to receiving the news of the armistice. These memories seem to have crystallised into stories that are, on the one hand, realistic descriptions of how the narrators received the news of the armistice. On the other hand, individuals still recall these moments in ways that appeal to the emotional character of the situation, or they deliberately refer to different, even contradictory, feelings present in the events:

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<sup>5</sup> Welzer-Lenz 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Wertsch 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Welzer 2002.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. Conway 1995.

*"On September 5, 1944, the Continuation War ended. On that day I was herding the cows, kilometres away from home, I was 13 years old at the time. I was surprised when my aunt appeared at the edge of the meadow, waving her hand. She came next to me and started crying: war is now over and peace made, but we lost Karelia and much more. I didn't know what to say, and I still don't know whether my aunt was crying because of happiness or sadness, because so much was lost but still the turmoil of war ended."* (Woman, b. 1931.)<sup>9</sup>

*"I remember the end of the Continuation War well. My family had been invited to a family wedding in Kankaanpää. There were many guests, and there was – occasionally very critical – discussion of the problems of making peace. Many thought that it was too early for peace, some disagreed. The situation was scary, especially because of the Germans."* (Woman, b. 1920.)

The majority of the Finnish soldiers returned home in September 1944, soon after the interim peace agreement was signed. Some of the men had to wait until November, because the Finnish-German war began soon after the armistice. Northern Finland became a war area, and while the southern region began to return to life under peace, the war continued in Lapland. There was, at the time, a German military presence in Finland: the German front extended from Norway to Northern Finland and across the Soviet border. As a condition of the peace treaty, the Soviet Union demanded that Finland drive German troops out of Northern Finland. A male narrator born in 1926 recollects the conflicted moods at the time he took part in supervising the German soldiers' departure from Southern Finland: *"After the war had ended, on one late night (at 23 hours) there was an alert that ordered Finnish soldiers to immediately organise in officer patrols to make sure that the German soldiers were on their departure ships at 2.00 o'clock that night. Everything went peacefully, although the brothers-in-arms we had socialised with at their canteen a few hours before were now doing 'snip snap' throat-cutting gestures at their former brothers-in-arms from their ship's deck."*

Some writers associated the coming of peace with the moments when the men returned home from the front. These memories contain common emotionally charged vivid images: for example, the return of a father or someone else close to the narrator or the arrival in the village of unkempt bearded men in their shabby uniforms. Many who experienced the war in their childhood felt alienated from their fathers serving at the war front. This feeling of alienation did not always completely disappear with the restoration of peace and the father's return. The men who were at the front during the war were only seldom granted home furlough, which is why especially small children did not even recognise their father when he returned home after peace had been established. The absence had alienated children from their fathers, and at first this may have felt even scary for the children.

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<sup>9</sup> The excerpts are, as far as is possible, literal translations of the texts written by the informants.

*“Men were granted furlough from the front every now and then. Dad didn’t have furlough during the Winter War but he was only drafted for a short time. During the Continuation War, he did have furlough, but I don’t remember for how many times. The first time he had already been gone for such a long time that my four-year-old little brother didn’t recognise him. I was fetching some firewood from the shed and when I came back, my brother was in the yard looking a bit confused and said: ‘Some strange man went in our house’. I went inside and sure enough, it was dad.”* (Man, b. 1932.)

*“When my father came home from the war, I remember hiding behind the door, and no one could get me out. My father was bearded and dirty and I was very scared of that ‘strange’ bearded man. My mother had heated up the sauna and after my father had been deloused, shaven and dressed in his own clothes, I had the courage to go sit in his lap.”* (Woman, b.1937.)

While the men had been absent during the war, the women had taken care of farms as best as they could or had worked in factories. Women had a lot of work to do and little help, and there was not necessarily much time to pay attention to the children. People remember the longing for the mother continuing even after peace returned, and it may have even coloured the rest of their lives: *“My sister, who had wistfully missed our mother during the war years, still yearned for her. Even later, she couldn’t forgive our mother for these abandonments. Their relationship was bad until our mother died.”* (Woman, b. 1935.)

With the end of the war, women’s roles and contributions became more subtle as they began taking care of and guiding the men who had returned home. *“My mother could ‘read’ him [father] properly and sometimes acted as an ‘interpreter’”* (Woman, b. 1937). On the other hand, women and children also had to adapt to the world of the men damaged by the war; they too suffered and had to learn to cope with the men’s problems and to continuously control their own behaviour. One can ask what kinds of experiences and memories these situations created in the minds of these children, the next generation of Finns.

## SETTLING INTO PEACETIME

Many informants described how, in their own family, a relatively trouble-free adaptation to peacetime life prevailed. The material does not include many accounts by informants who reminisce about having had problems in their post-war life. However, outside one’s own family problems of adaptation, such as alcoholism or mental disorders, were seen more often. Especially female informants narrated that many war veterans relived traumatic experiences of the war through their nightmares. Not all of the men who returned from the front could without problems adapt to the civilian life that was considered normal.

*“One morning when my mother had returned from the cattle shed, she had heard a strange noise, and my father was under the bed holding a vacuum cleaner tube and*

*thinking that he was in 'the trenches'. It was very narrow down there, we wondered how he had got there without waking up. It was a tragicomic nightmare. All we could do was smile."* (Woman, b. 1937.)

*"The men who had been at the front were still fighting in their thoughts and nightmares. A friend of mine told me about her father, who died about five years ago, how he shouted his last words tossing in his hospital bed: 'Now the Russians are coming!' A tank fighter – fought all across the border, even took part in driving the Germans out of Lapland. After the war he was anxious. Went from one religion to the other, apparently without finding a peace of mind. Died of his difficulties, bitter and bored."* (Woman, b. 1929.)

The recurring nightmares and changed behaviour and personality of the men who had returned from the front are now categorised as post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>10</sup> During the war and post-war times, Finnish psychiatry was constitution-oriented. According to psychiatric diagnostics, war experiences could not be the cause of the symptoms or problems that men were exhibiting. Such symptoms were regarded as a weakness that was inherent in the men themselves. The low frequency of post-traumatic stress disorder among Finnish war veterans has been connected to the "culture of keeping silent". The blindness to identify possible effects of war experiences is in accordance with post-war psychiatric theory.<sup>11</sup> Many of the informants recollect a strong social pressure that made it unacceptable to talk about the war or the suffering caused by it. The culture of keeping silent is also evident in many autobiographies written by socially influential Finnish persons, e.g. politicians and senior officers.<sup>12</sup>

According to the inquiry material collected sixty years after the war, the problems of war veterans were acknowledged by most of the informants through their descriptions of how some men had become strange and had started to act differently. Narrators contextualised the feelings and problems of war veterans differently compared with the attitudes prevailing during the post-war years. Informants emphasised understanding and sympathy for veterans because of their heavy war experiences. At an individual level, memories of war could erupt in various ways. For example, deeply instilled feelings of shame meant that for a long time veterans would keep silent about their problems caused by traumatic war experiences. In the following, a daughter describes her father; the excerpt is a description of an eruption of such emotions, of which the father had not spoken previously.<sup>13</sup>

*"I was with my parents at their summer house when my father turned 80. He had already been worn out by illness. When we came back from the summer cottage, it turned out that his veteran friends had stopped by and given him a veteran flag. It made his mind flood with the worst experiences of the war. He cried and narrated them all through that evening. A lot of things I had never heard about, and very exactly, just like it had happened yesterday."* (Woman, b. 1936.)

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<sup>10</sup> Jones–Wessely 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Kivimäki 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Karonen–Tarjamo 2006b 390–391.

<sup>13</sup> cf. Anepaio 2003.

## THE FAITH IN THE FUTURE, RECONSTRUCTION

Little by little, life began to settle into relative normality, and people started to adapt to post-war everyday life with all its practical problems. Since men who had been at the front sometimes returned to very different circumstances, the memories of life becoming normal are also quite different. Finland had not been occupied, and it retained its independence after the war. Furthermore, most of the country had not suffered from aerial bombings. Externally, many men returned to life as before, picking up from where they had left off. According to the narrators, these men seemed to adapt to peacetime life without conspicuous problems. Most saliently, this was the case when the informants referred to farmers.

Coming through the war and the post-war time of personal and social reconstruction was, in a way, concentrated into a pan-national effort. Even though the war was lost, people interpreted the peace as a victory. The heroic time of reconstruction after the war has stuck firmly in the Finnish collective memory, as illustrated by the account of a woman born in 1929: *"Finns are persevering. The down-beaten Finnish society gathered its strength after the war. I think then we co-operated. Maybe for the first time we were building a welfare state for the whole nation. It took its time. We were satisfied with our accomplishments. We built and got wealthy."*

The nation that had survived the war started, as the woman described, to rebuild its country, whose development had been "paralysed" during wartime. This reconstruction was undertaken with high hopes for the future. Even though many problems caused by the war only emerged after peace had been declared, the end of war was still a kind of new beginning. Of course, the war left significant marks on Finnish society in the form of broken lives, various difficulties in returning to civilian life or permanent disabilities. However, these tragedies could still not completely muffle the enthusiasm with which most Finns started rebuilding their lives and looking for the future:

*"I lived through the time from war to peace, and I can say that the effects weren't only negative. In the long run, it has at its best taught me how to proportion time and things. Through hard war times one learns the significance of peace. I remember I experienced these post-war years as a relief. We followed the global situation interestedly and opinionatedly. Regardless of the generation, many nations including Finns had gone through rough times. Even though we could see the consequences of war as hard in the future, we had still achieved peace. It carried with it faith and hope about the future."* (Woman, b. 1929.)

One reason behind the positive images of how Finnish society and Finns survived the damages and losses caused by the war could be that Finland did not have to start rebuilding the country in a situation of total collective trauma. The country had retained independency, had not been occupied and in the end most of the people interpreted the consequences of the Continuation War as a heroic defence victory. These "facts" boosted positive attitudes towards the future.

## CONCLUSION

The quotation at the beginning of my paper is a reminder of how the effects of the Second World War continue to have an impact right up to the present day. The outbreak and the end of the war were turning points in national history, but they are equally turning points in the reminiscence of individual lives. The war and its different phases changed the whole direction of Finnish social and cultural development. The return to peace can be seen as a new beginning – as paradoxical as this may seem. The war had been fought and peace negotiated elsewhere; whereas the problems of an individual's own life and the solutions to them were close at hand. In the same way, the correspondence between Finnish soldiers and their families during the war largely described everyday and normal matters. This sustained the solidarity between the war and home fronts. The feelings of irregularity and uncertainty about the future that were brought about by the war were “covered” by discussion of everyday matters. This acted as a sort of bridge to normal, civilian life.<sup>14</sup>

Most narrators seem to share autobiographical memories in which the post-war years were filled with work and, in a way, looking to the future. For those who had experienced the war, this kind of attitude may have been a part of their survival strategy. People may have thought that it would be best to forget unpleasant experiences and try to concentrate on building their new lives. Memory is always intertwined with the context of the times being remembered. Post-war life was naturally influenced by the *zeitgeist*; the future of one's Fatherland was uncertain. Many narrators at least briefly described the social and political uncertainties and the ultimatums presented by the Soviet Union that were very much part of the return to peace in Finland. However, the narrators wrote about matters close to their own hearts and seemed not to connect these incidents of big history to their own everyday lives. One can ask if now, in the twenty-first century, reminiscences of post-war time include elements from different decades, or if aspects passed over or repressed directly after the war have become more obvious topics of remembering, public discourse, and research.

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<sup>14</sup> Hagelstam 2006. 224–227.

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